



In conversation with Sara Reisman on group exhibition, *To Cast Too Bold A Shadow*, curator of The 8th Floor gallery in New York

A conversation between Sara Reisman and Ashlin Ballif on *To Cast Too Bold A Shadow*, an exhibition curated by Sara Reisman with George Bolster and Anjuli Nanda Diamond at The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation's gallery space, The 8th Floor, in New York.

To Cast Too Bold A Shadow
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The 8th Floor
17 W 17th Street
New York, NY 10011

All photos courtesy of The 8th Floor





Ashlin Ballif: Tell me about the title of the exhibition, more specifically, how did you come about the decision to use a line from Adrienne Rich's poem, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963)?

Sara Reisman: Right, the larger framework for the show *To Cast Too Bold A Shadow* is the fourth in a series of six shows, under the larger umbrella *Revolutionary Cycles* which began in 2019. The idea was to look at a number of different themes that intersect with social and political change. The first, *Revolution from Without...*, was about human rights and borders, the second was about the relationship between surveillance and how news media is produced (*The Watchers*), the third was on labor called *Relational Economies: Labor Over Capitol*. The focus of the fourth installment *To Cast Too Bold A Shadow* is misogyny. The thinking began as: let's do a show about feminism and gender. As we got closer to planning the exhibition, it became clear that misogyny is truly the underlying issue. The topic came out of—it felt like we had an “Aha!” moment—doing an interview with Fierce Pussy back in 2018. We were discussing how gender terminology keeps changing, and one of the members of Fierce Pussy, Nancy Brooks Brody said something interesting along the lines of, “no matter what you call gender, misogyny is actually the problem.” For example, if you’re looking at somebody who’s trans and you see the struggles they might be facing, it ultimately has to do with misogyny, or the hatred of women.

So, we thought, “how are we going to do a show about misogyny?” One of the challenges of course, is that misogyny has such negative implications. We (the curatorial team including George Bolster and Anjuli Nanda Diamond) were thinking through in the research phase how to position this in a way that won’t be immediately off-putting. And so, I had thought, why don’t we do some poetic research? We came up with a list of poets and had everyone create a list of texts. I know it might sound funny but we did a little poetry reading in the office. Adrienne Rich’s poetry was familiar to me in college in the 90s. The poem, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, it’s just interesting because it depicts this moment of the struggles of domestic life. It felt like the idea of *To Cast* was pointed because of the idea that women should just step aside, or have been

historically told to take a back seat—so we asked: what is a stronger stance a woman can take? To be too bold is always the risk but in a way is a requirement if change is going to happen.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Second Binding*, 1964

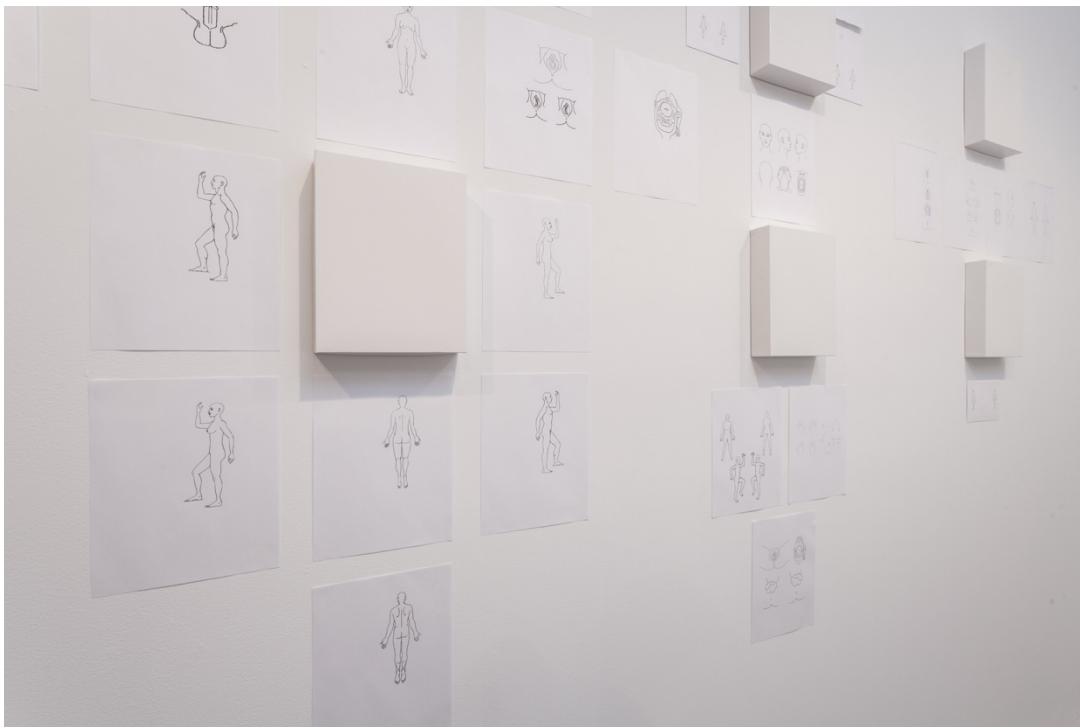
AB: To be too bold is key. What do you think this exhibition says about where the feminist movement is currently? I know this exhibition is celebrating the 100th anniversary of Women’s Suffrage. What in your mind are these artists stating, in your point of view, about where we are at in 2020/2021 in regards to misogyny?

SR: Well you have the most historic works in the show, some are by Mierle Laderman Ukeles and her artwork *Second Binding* which she made in art school in 1964. At the time, that piece was criticized for being pornographic and she was called “oversexed” by the male faculty at Pratt Institute. And also made the same year is Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, included in the show. Though it’s a performance in ‘65, it was originally produced in ’64. These early works in very, very different ways—even just by the context of Mierle’s experience in art school, reveal a lot about how women as art students or performance artists in the early 60s experienced misogyny. I would also point to two contemporary artists from the exhibition, Aliza Shvarts and Joiri Minaya. For me, they are an indication of where we are going, and an indication of the language that’s emerged within the feminist movement about women’s rights or human’s rights. I think if we look at Aliza’s work it’s a very different dynamic than Joiri’s. I’ll address the main piece of hers in the show, *#dominicanwomengooglesearch*, which reflects on how women of color from developing parts of the world are depicted on parts of the web. Specifically, dating websites and trafficking websites. Joiri is calling out the subjugation of women from the Caribbean. She’s looking at the Dominican Republic, and then also pointing to the degradation of women in the media in an unchecked way. I spent a week installing Joiri’s work, and spending this time with it, the piece is much more violent than I realized. I think that the

generation that she is a part of and that she can, in such a sophisticated way call out, that sexism, I think is meaningful.



Joiri Minaya, #dominicanwomengooglesearch, 2016



Aliza Shvarts, Anatomy, 2020

SR: Then to look at Aliza Shvarts' work, *Anatomy*, it's a version based on her previous work *Anthem* (2019),

commissioned for our show. *Anthem* is a slightly different iteration. I haven't seen many works by artists that call out consent in the frame of these questions Aliza's asking. The previous work, *Anatomy* is a series of replicas of rape kits from thirty-nine of the [fifty] United States. She has amassed an ongoing collection aiming towards an [archive](#). The diagrams or illustrations that are part of these rape kits (first of all she's interested in the idea that these are made by an artist somewhere) there's a way they're reproduced. She took the rape kits and laid them out and removed all the text. So you're just looking at how the body is depicted, you have cis-gendered bodies, women, men and babies, different body parts. What starts to become apparent is that there are variations that actually don't reveal the proper anatomical details you need to know to understand what assault happened. Some of Aliza's questioning has to do with what about non-binary bodies? How are they depicted because they don't show up in any way in these diagrams, and there's a high number or percentage of assault against people that are non-binary, non cis-gendered bodies. So there's an interest there in trying to discover the flaws in these kits. And the biggest flaw of all, has to do with consent. So you can take this kit and it can indicate that there was an injury, but it doesn't tell you whether the person said yes or no. The work shows what's missing.



Betty Tompkins, *Apologia (Caravaggio #1)*, 2018 Text on Image: R. Kelly, R. KELLY HAS CLOSE FRIENDSHIPS WITH A NUMBER OF WOMEN WHO ARE STRONG AND INDEPENDENT, HAPPY, WELL-CARED FOR AND FREE TO COME AND GO AS THEY PLEASE. WE DENY THE MANY DARK DESCRIPTIONS PUT FORTH BY INSTIGATORS AND LIARS WHO HAVE THEIR OWN AGENDA FOR PROFIT AND FAME.

SR: Betty Tompkins' two series, *Apologia* and *Women Words* (2018) also deals with the language surrounding misogyny. Both series use art historical pages she's torn out of books; for *Apologia* she's written

and then painted apologies made by celebrity men on them. Generally, these apologies have probably been written by a PR person or by a spokesperson writing on behalf of the celebrity. And so, in that instance she's really looking at language of the apology and the way that sexual assault is referred to. She's also commenting on the way that the men are apologizing while they're simultaneously trying to demonstrate a kind of victimization. That's how I see it.

It's a more nuanced understanding of the power relations that are at play in our culture. I don't know that we're necessarily ahead. There's a lot of work to be done. Are things better than they were? What we do know is there's language now. There's a different discourse that enables one to speak out if harassed or assaulted. I think the question then is how do we activate that discourse towards change.

AB: The topic of discomfort and privacy surrounding consent and its use as a power tool of protection of one's body is discussed in this exhibition. In that train of thought, I was wondering how the use of a name, as discussed in Rajkamal Kahlon's and Maria Rapicovoli's work, is a power tool as well. Rather, how taking away a name can detach the personal, the responsibility and accountability towards an action that an oppressor has done. What significance does withholding a name have in this context in the exhibition?

SR: That's a great point, and an idea both artists touch upon in their own way. Maria Rapicovoli's film *The Other: a familiar story*, tells the story of a family lore that Maria grew up knowing about. A woman in Maria's family was forced to move from her home in Italy to the US, in Massachusetts. She was forced into a marriage, left behind her children and family. I think Maria's decision not to name the character in the film itself was to leave it open so it could represent a universal experience of displacement. A broader yet personal experience of misogyny intersects with the experience of women in an immigrant context, the lack of rights, the loss of rights, the lack of capacity to speak, a lot of the film depicts these moments of bursting, screaming silently.



Maria Rapicovoli, film still from *The Other: A Familiar Story*, 2020



Arabische Frau

Rajkamal Kahlon, (*Untitled*) Bandaged Pin Up, 2017, from series *Do You Know Our Names*

SR: Then with Rajkamal Kahlon's work, the untitled series, *Do You Know Our Names* (2017), does connect but is based on this book that she bought in a bookstore in Vienna. The book *Die Volker der Erde* (*People of the Earth*) includes images of colonized women. A lot of her work has mined the documentation of the colonized subject. She then humanizes them with more contemporary clothing and accessories. I think in some ways, it's a different set of questions where on the one hand, Maria chooses to omit the name of the woman in the film so there's a universal identification and in Rajkamal's case, there's this notion that the names are unknown therefore they don't get the historical representation, ultimately asking: Is it because they're women? Is it because they're colonized subjects?

I think it's this idea that we're often talking about individuals. So the naming piece is tricky because on the one hand, there's something about naming and recognizing the person. But there's also the idea of protecting an identity and protecting privacy--not fetishizing or making a name public. The trouble is, if you think about the movement in recent years in New York City to support monuments of women, I mean that gives a sense that women haven't been commemorated for their contributions to society in equitable ways. In some ways, maybe that impulse is to do with male ego, maybe not. I think in terms of understanding humanity, it is important to know what women have done, and because history is constructed this way...names do matter. But you're right, it goes back to consent. If a woman is historically retroactively noted, this is what she has contributed, and you start to mine her history, well how is the consent of that granted? It's a delicate balance. For example, Maria didn't consult with her family before presenting her film. The story of assault in the film hadn't been discussed. But it is the artist's story to tell.

AB: Even giving consent to a name or to naming a name, that in itself is casting too bold a shadow. It's being brave enough to declare a name and stand behind it. But there are also elements of discretion and protection to balance.

SR: I think the thing with *To Cast Too Bold A Shadow*, as you say it again... As a title, to me, what it also conjures is the idea that's in a lot of contemporary culture; if you're "too" opinionated as a woman or "too outspoken," there's going to be push-back and it's a double standard. It's this question of what are the limits of a woman's rights to participate in public culture? When is it too overbearing? Overbearing is not a word we use to describe men, or too assertive. Someone violating you as a man is one thing, but I mean assertive in the sense of ambition or acting on a desire for change. The tension there for me really does speak to the quiet and entrenched forms of oppression that are less visible... but they're there.

AB: I was happy to see this exhibition touch upon that, however it's disheartening at the same time to recognize how relatable these oppressions still are to women universally. Kahlon's work discusses this as well, in *Untitled (Pin Up)*, the idea that women are bandaged and blindfolded simultaneously or that those things are one in the same was interesting to me. I was wondering how or do you believe that patriarchal systems act as both a bandage and a blindfold to women? Does the system ever protect women? Or blindfold in an 'ignorance-is-bliss' way?

SR: My eliding the bandage and blindfold [in the exhibition essay] was more of a poetic license I took while writing for the exhibition. However, I know that with Rajkamal, with some of her work, it has addressed the grotesque and tried to picture trauma and abuse—sometimes sexualized, sometimes not. So that's what the bandages speak to but I would have to ask her. Then again, they are depicting the injury of oppression, these injuries that are often not seen or maybe they are but aren't necessarily adequately covered in the media. I

think it's really about the grotesque subjugation of a variety of people, women included. I made the link between the blindfold and bandage as a way of, you know there's that expression of "see no evil, speak no evil"? It's that kind of looking away, averting the gaze. It's partly about accountability. I didn't really think about the patriarchy as being protective but of course on some level, it is. We're living in a time when it feels really past that. It's hard to say who it's protecting at this point. There might've been a notion where decades ago, that was the case. If you look back to the longer form of the Rich poem, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, there are these descriptions of being kind of sequestered in the poem or domestic life. There's a line in the poem that's in reference to being overpraised for mediocrity. The terms aren't equal. You don't get the same kind of feedback as a woman.

AB: I was also thinking 'protect' in the sense of, you are brainwashed, you could say, growing up as a woman or identifying as female, into thinking that whatever system that you're in is the place that you should hold. That that is a protection in itself, you should be comfortable where you're at, you are not going to be looked-out-for if you step outside of that role. In that sense, it's a façade of a protection.

SR: There's also the idea of paternalism that links to patriarchy but it's less pointed. That's maybe the friendlier or kinder notion that someone is looking out for you. But then the question becomes, how much do you want to be looked after as an autonomous, independent woman? Do you need that looking after? That system? I think traditionally women have been protected by men, but as we see in contemporary life, that protection is not always in our favor.



Aliza Shvarts, *Homage*, 2017

AB: Exactly, it begs the question, what is the intent of that care? I had a general question on this note of protection. We've been in this pandemic for about a year now, it's become extremely difficult for people, particularly women who are in domestic abusive relationships because there is an overwhelming fear of being locked inside a home with an abuser. Did you think to discuss this topic of domestic abuse more deeply in this exhibition? Or is this something that you feel the artists touch upon in their own ways?

SR: Rapicovoli's work touches upon it directly. The character in the film that you see is running from domestic violence. The narrative is that she is trying to escape the abuse. There were a number of topics I felt we didn't really deal with directly that I thought about when making the exhibition, such as abortion, freedom of choice, etc. There are a lot of things! It's kind of a dense show in some ways. I think this topic is there, it's implied but less direct in some of the works. For example, in the Hackney Flashers', *Untitled (From 'Who's still holding the baby?')*, 1978. I have to say, I didn't want to tread lightly there, if that makes sense. It's lived experiences. I think Aliza's work goes there too, it asks: how do you report or understand the impact of assault? It's not so much about where that happens or universalized necessarily, but it is looking to the body. Her second piece in the show *Homage*, 2017 also speaks to those power dynamics and the patriarchal system of marriage.

AB: I appreciated how Rapicovoli's work was a nod to the topic, without being too glaring or overlooked. I think it's important to continue to nudge the conversation about abuse as an epidemic to the forefront. Similarly with accountability as we discussed earlier.

SR: Right, and to specify, the epidemic of toxic masculinity in this context. Going back to Betty Tompkins' work and the idea of apologizing and the act of taking accountability: how is somebody compelled to feel the need to be accountable?

AB: How do you get people to care? Or is that possible?

SR: Yes, it's not about making someone feel bad. It's about reaching a point of mutual understanding that this has to change, and each is responsible for their part in it.

To view the exhibition virtually, click [here](#).

Sara Reisman is a curator and writer based in New York City, where she is the Artistic Director of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation which supports art and social justice through grant making to New York City nonprofit organizations, and exhibitions and public programs at the foundation's gallery, The 8th Floor. Recent shows curated include *Revolution from Without*, *The Watchers*, and *Relational Economies: Labor over Capital* (all at The 8th Floor), as well as *Worlds Without End: Stories Around Borders*, co-curated with Michael Dempsey for the Hugh Lane Dublin City Gallery. Recent books include *Mobilizing Pedagogy: Two Projects in the Americas by Pablo Helguera and Suzanne Lacy with Pilar Riaño-Alcalá* (published by Amherst College Press, 2018), and *Elia Alba: The Supper Club* (published by Hirmer, 2019). From 2008 to 2014, Reisman served as director of New York City's Percent for Art program where she commissioned and managed more than 100 permanent artworks for civic sites including libraries, public schools, courthouses, plazas, and parks. Reisman has worked in curatorial roles at the Queens Museum (2008), the New Museum (2005-2006), and the Philadelphia ICA (2004-2006). She was the 2011 and 2020 critic-in-residence at Art Omi, an international visual arts residency in Ghent, New York, a 2013 Marica Vilcek Curatorial Fellow, and was awarded a 2020 Artslink residency in St. Petersburg. Reisman has taught

art history and contemporary art at the University of Pennsylvania, SUNY Purchase School of Art+Design, and since 2016, she continues to teach within the MA in Curatorial Practice Program at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.